



DECISION NOTICE
Raundal Coulee Conservation Easement

Region 4 Headquarters
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVE CONSIDERED

Proposed Action

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) proposes to purchase a Conservation Easement (CE) on the Tom and Karen Browning Ranch. This CE will conserve agriculture and wildlife habitat and ensure continuing public access to the ranch's lands and adjacent public lands. The Raundal Coulee CE would protect approximately 2,596 acres of riparian, plains forest, and sagebrush grasslands in southeast Petroleum County and the eastern boundary of Garfield County along the Musselshell River. The Tom and Karen Browning Ranch is divided into two parcels bordered by lands managed by US Bureau of Land Management and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and other privately-owned lands. The project is located approximately 15 miles north of Mosby, Montana; 30 miles northeast of Winnett and 30 miles northwest of Sand Springs, Montana.

No Action

The No Action alternative for this project is described as MFWP not purchasing a CE on the Tom and Karen Browning Ranch. The Landowners would likely continue to operate the Ranch with its current configuration. However, future land management status and configuration could change if the Ranch were to sell on the open market.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PUBLIC PROCESS

MFWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. MFWP released a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for public review of the proposed action on December 13, 2013 and accepted public comment until 5:00 P. M. on January 11, 2014.

Information describing the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was distributed statewide to media outlets and in particular was printed in the *Lewistown News Argus*, *Great Falls Tribune*

and the *Billings Gazette*. Additional news releases were noted as having aired on public and private radio stations. Copies of the EA were distributed to Petroleum and Garfield County Commissioners, neighboring landowners of record, interested individuals, groups, and agencies to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. The EA was also available for public review on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments") from December 13, 2013 through January 11, 2014. An MFWP public notice was issued and posted on FWP's website (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "News Releases") the same day.

A public meeting was held in Lewistown, MT on January 6th at FWP's Lewistown Area Office. Two members of the public attended. An additional public meeting was held in Winnett, MT on January 8th at the Petroleum County Courthouse, at which 16 members of the public attended.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received 8 total written comments via email, regular mail, and at the public meetings. A breakdown of the comments is as follows: 8 were in support of the proposed action (purchase of the conservation easement), 0 supported the No Action Alternative, and 0 did not specify.

RESPONSE TO COMMENTS

I am in favor of MFWP purchasing this proposed CE. This is important habitat for many wildlife species, provides recreational opportunity for hunters and non-hunters, and helps preserve a ranching heritage in the area. This will benefit present and future generations to come. Please find and do more projects like this.

The mission of MFWP is to provide stewardship of the fish, wildlife, parks, and recreational resources of Montana while contributing to the quality of life for present and future generations. MCA 87-1-209 grants MFWP the authority to acquire lands or easements upon lands suitable for game, bird, fish, or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation, or protection; for public hunting, fishing, or trapping areas; and for state parks and outdoor recreation. Actions like the purchase of this CE contribute to MFWP's mission and are authorized and enabled by this and other legislation.

While not submitted as any form of formal comment, a common theme and concern at the public meeting in Winnett addressed Petroleum County's local tax base and takings of private property and private property rights.

Any Conservation Easement obtained by MFWP reflects voluntary participation and action on the part of the private landowner, exercising their private property rights. An Easement is incentive-based—relying on the conveyance of partial legal interests in land, allowing the land to remain in private ownership while protecting and conserving natural resource values and traditional land uses, such as ranching. Because land ownership remains with the land owner, there is also no change to the local tax base.


DECISION

In reviewing all public comment, evaluating the environmental effects, and other relevant information, I recommend that FWP pursue the completion of the Raundal Coulee Conservation

Easement Project and recommend that the F&W Commission approve the proposed action as well. This action will also require the approval of the Montana Land Board at an upcoming meeting.

Through the MEPA process, FWP found no significant impacts on the human or physical environments associated with this proposal. Therefore, the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and an environmental impact statement is not required.

After review of this proposal, it is my decision to accept the draft EA as supplemented by this Decision Notice and the response to public comment contained herein. In combination, these documents constitute the Final EA. FWP believes the completion of this project is in the best interests of working agricultural landscapes, fish and wildlife, and public recreation.



Gary Bertellotti
Region 4 Fish and Wildlife Supervisor

1/13/2014

Date

